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ABSTRACT

It is argued that rock lyrics, alternatively seen as poetry, are a source of instructional material for students of English as a Second Language (ESL), offering an opportunity for literary analysis that is highly motivating, relevant to students' lives, a potential bridge to more serious literature, and a readily-available source of authentic reading and listening material. The content can be viewed in two ways: (1) literature in the form of rock music (poems set to music or lyrics that are new versions of previous literary works), or (2) rock lyrics as poems in their own right. It is proposed that interpreting rock lyrics in class can be a significant opportunity to exchange views, discover how much members of the class community have in common, and learn how others view the world. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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ROCK POETRY: THE LITERATURE OUR STUDENTS LISTEN TO

It was one of those splendid sunny mornings in Buenos Aires. My class of higher-intermediate students of English as a foreign language had just finished analysing a short story and were now supposed to answer the one-million-dollar question in the text-book: "What story have you read recently? Summarize the plot and identify the theme."
"Well, have you been reading anything interesting lately?" I asked, if only to make the question sound less imposing.
"Yes," a twenty-year-old boy said. "It's the story of a man who leaves his home and family behind to help build England's railways. It's a hard, dangerous job. He sees many of his friends die in landslides. He suffers. He remembers his wife and children but he cannot go back because they need the money. It's a story about work and exploitation, about the high price of progress..."
" How interesting!" I said, a proud literature teacher who has just heard one of her students summarize plot and identify theme successfully. "Was the story written by a nineteenth century writer?"
"No," my student frowned, "it's a song by Genesis. Haven't you heard ' **Driving the Last Spike**' ?"

I think I can remember a slight note of reproach in my student's voice; at least, his question sounded to me as if I had asked "Haven't you read **HAMLET**?" His words were a reminder of what I have come to consider self-evident: **the words of rock songs make up a highly representative corpus within the literature of the second half of the XXth century, particularly of literature written in English.** Yet, they do not form a proportionally significant part within the selection of material made by contemporary literature teachers.
Although we, foreign language teachers, very often make use of song lyrics in our language classes (especially for the development of listening comprehension skills) we do not normally select them for textual analysis and even more seldom do we "read them as literature". However, many teachers are worried about how to get their teenage students interested in textual analysis and about how to teach English literature to students who have to face technical difficulties in texts whose relevance to their lives they do not always see -and all this in a foreign language! Paradoxically, a parallel literary system develops side by side with "school literature" and its restrictions and prejudices as to what can or should be read. My simple proposal is to start with that "alternative system", with that which students feel naturally inclined to: texts of non-conventional circulation -comics, graffiti, all kinds of magazines. Within that corpus, a good selection of rock lyrics will prove to be an excellent opportunity for literary analysis. Such analysis will provide students with the necessary tools to face more unfamiliar texts and will surely get them interested in other forms of literature whose relevance and richness they will then be better equipped to appreciate.
In short, rock lyrics are:

- highly motivating
- relevant to students' lives
- a potential bridge leading to more serious (i.e. "consecrated") literature
- a source of easy-to-get authentic reading and listening material (particularly in an EFL situation)

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If my student took it for granted that the events in a narrative poem he had **heard** in the form of a rock song made up the plot of a text he had **read**, what is the relationship between literature and rock? We can look at this question in at least two ways:

a) Literature in rock

b) Rock as literature

LITERATURE IN ROCK

By this we mean poems set to music or lyrics which are hypertexts of previous literary works. "Hypertexts" is used here as is done by Gerard Genette in his book **PALIMPSESTES** (1962), where he studies the relationships between one text and another, whether explicit or secret. He calls this TRANSTEXTUALITY . Within transtextual relationships, Genette defines hypertextuality as "the relationship that links text B (the HYPERTEXT) to a previous text A (the HYPOTEXT) in a way which is not a mere commentary. B tranforms A without necessarily quoting from A or making explicit allusions to it".
Examples of hypertexts are:

- KATE BUSH, **"Wuthering Heights"**,
  after the homonymous novel by Emily Brontë
- RICK WAKEMAN, **"1984"**, after the novel by George Orwell
- IRON MAIDEN, **"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"**,
  based on the poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge
- ALAN PARSON'S PROJECT, **"Extraordinary Narrations"** ,
  hypertexts of stories by Edgar Allan Poe

No matter how "soft" or how "hard", these works enrich the discussion of the hypotexts and easily bring up the question of the texts' relevance to students' lives.
The examples mentioned allow us to see the two **basic thematic lines** of rock lyrics:

a) **Protest and denunciation**: against the official order, authority, the consumer society. Its main motifs are: freedom, "escape" into a utopian world of peace and love, community life in far-away places in contact with nature, a return to the natural and spontaneous, ecological concerns.

b) **The oneiric, mystical and hallucinogenic** (connected with drug culture, surrealism, oriental religions, mythology, psychedelism).

Both lines appear blended from the very beginning. Yet, although the works concerned with social and political denunciation remain simple, repetitive and explicit, aimed at a larger public though always opposed in principle to "commercial music"or "pop", the second line becomes gradually more complex, highly symbolic and obscure.

ROCK AS LITERATURE

Even when not related to literary works, rock lyrics themselves can be considered poems. Traditionally, the lyrics of popular songs in our century were meant to communicate a verbal message which was easy to understand and in whose decodification music was not an obstacle. They respected what Eduardo Romano in **"Palabra y canción"** (1990) calls the **"intelligibility threshold"**. In this respect, these songs contrasted sharply with nursery rhymes, ritual songs and folklore in general, where the phonological associations triggered off by the lexical elements had always been more important than the expression of what words mean in every-day language.

It is rock ' n' roll who, in the 50's, will radically change this state of affairs by going back to primitive singing. Think of Bill Halley's "Rock Around the Clock": short onomatopoeic words form a mechanical enumeration; the singer's voice is but another instrument. People all over the world can recognize the words, identify with them and hum or even sing them, no matter how elementary their knowledge of English, because words are just one more instrument contributing to the whole, regardless of their dictionary meaning. Words have liberated themselves from the duty of meaning something precise and concrete -which has always been the case in poetry.

The Beatles know this, and humming, mumbling and shouting form as important a part of their lyrics as do the still clearly intelligible words. John Lennon points out in an interview that all his songs are born out of playing with words freely, so that words sometimes make sense and sometimes don't. In the first press report that appeared on the group, Bob Wooler, the disk jockey at the Liverpool Tavern Club, writes: "I think the Beatles are No. 1 because they resurrected original style rock'n'roll music, the origins of which are to be found in American negro singers... Here again, in the Beatles, was **the stuff that screams are made of**. Here was the excitement -both physical and aural- that symbolised the rebellion of youth ..." (quoted in Wicke, 1990, the bold type is my own).

This tendency will become stronger and stronger. Today, as we all know, it is hardly possible to transcribe the lyrics of the songs our students bring to class. This fact is so widely accepted, even among native speakers of the language in question, that compact disks are accompanied by a printed transcription of the song lyrics. Eduardo Romano (1990) refers to this phenomenon as the **RETRIBALIZATION OF THE WORD**, a return to its ritual power: it's the listener who builds up his own "internal lyrics" by means of the babbling, the humming and the words he hears and their combination with music. And among them there's shouting, the primeval scream, which, as in tribal rites, channels aggressiveness, brings singers and listeners together and allows them to identify as members of a community. What's more, this use of the word as sound awakening a plurality of meanings in the active mind of the reader, this return to the primitive and the oneiric, inscribes rock lyrics within a literary tradition which goes back to Romanticism and goes through Symbolism and nonsense poetry into the avant-garde forms of literary modernism.

Modern literary theory lays emphasis, precisely, upon the active role of the reader rather than on the author's creative genius or on the text as a self-sufficient entity. Umberto Eco (1979), for example, points out that there are works which challenge the reader to play a protagonic role, to **build** the work; Roland Barthes (1970) states that the interest of a literary work, rather than to make readers **consumers** of the text, is to make them **producers** of it. This seems to be the case with rock readers and listeners. What is more, the primeval scream finds its xxth century correlative in the rock recital or live concert, where the participant joins the musicians and singers in a trance-like communion where the body plays an essential part and without which the work is definitely incomplete.

Up to what extent does the lone listener in his living-room or cut off under his walkman headphones share in this mode of reception? Perhaps the ever-growing tendency to make rock records during live performaces rather than in recording studios in an attempt to reconstruct the ritual which results from the give-and-take that takes place between artists and public.

As readers and listeners of rock, we form part of what Stanley Fish (1980) calls an "interpretive community" capable of applying shared interpretive procedures, but we are, at the same time, free to carry out our own, unique appropriation of the text and its music. Interpreting rock lyrics in class can then prove to be a magnificent opportunity to exchange views, to see how much the members of the community of the classroom have in common and also to learn to see the world from somebody else's perspective. In our role of teachers, we should never forget that no reading can be considered the definite, final, reading and that, as a result, no teacher can provide anything like "the right interpretation". This is something that, Jonathan Culler (1982) warns us, beginning literature students know quite well but they may have forgotten by the time they graduate or become literature teachers. Reading means accepting the hypothesis that a work can always grow -as long as the role of reader can be played.

Just as in a rock 'n' roll concert, students and teachers recreate and dramatize the ritual of reciprocal feedback which defines any artistic experience. With the precious help of our imagination, we remind one another that teaching and learning are the twin aspects of an equally creative process. So, paraphrasing my student, have you **read** **"Driving the Last Spike?"**

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